

A Study of the Trauma of Sexual Assault in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*

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Abstract

Sigmund Freud's ideas that traumatic experiences are repeated unconsciously, split the survivor's psyche by being trapped in their unconscious, influence the memories and thoughts, and their impact is only realized in a narrative reproduction of the past, set the foundation for trauma studies. This paper is developed within the framework of trauma studies through the characters of Grace from *Once Were Warriors* (1990) and Celie from *The Color Purple* (1982), as the psyches of these two characters have been affected after the sexual assaults committed against them. An attempt is made to understand how their traumatic experience transforms or deforms their sense of self, life, and the world. The reading of the two selected novels reveals that the experience of sexual assault had two very different impacts on the lives of Grace and Celie, wherein Grace commits suicide while Celie keeps living a disassociated life until she can gain control over her life. Efforts are made here to understand what must have caused such different responses by psychoanalyzing the parts of the novels that elaborate on the characters' traumatic experiences and their impact on them by interpreting their unconscious. It is observed that Celie finds companionship in Nettie, Sophie, and Shug—a woman-to-woman bond that forms a community allowing for Celie to be supported, inspired, loved, and motivated, which is something that Grace fails to have. The comfort of a community saves Celie, while Grace commits suicide while suffering all alone.

Keywords: Trauma studies, trauma, sexual assault, community.

The origin of trauma studies can be traced back to psychoanalysis and a few other ideas of Sigmund Freud. Michell Balaev suggests that “Freud’s theories—that traumatic experiences are repeated compulsively, divide the psyche, influence memory differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past—are key ideas informing the first development in trauma studies scholarship that address the theory of trauma and the ways that trauma influences memory and identity” ([Balaev, 363](#)). Originally, trauma was understood as a nondescript disruptive experience that may impact the victim’s psyche in such a manner that the victim’s memory is broken, self-worth is lost, and relationships with the world and the self are severed. “The concept of trauma, itself a source of critique, is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the survivor’s emotional organization and perception of the external world” ([360](#)). To further explain trauma, Balaev states that “Trauma is defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event harboured within the unconscious that causes a splitting of the ego or dissociation” ([361](#)). In a simple

explanation, any experience that is severe enough to have a negative and disturbing impact on the survivor’s psyche and is registered in the unconscious mind, which haunts her/him at every remembrance later, can be categorized as a traumatic experience. Annie Rogers defines trauma as any experience that “by its nature is in excess of what we can manage or bear” ([Rogers, 4](#)).

The study of trauma was originally in the domain of medicine and then psychology. Over the past few decades, it has gained relevance in literary and cultural studies too. In literary criticism, the field of trauma studies gained abundant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth’s “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History” (1996) and Kali Tal’s “Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma” (1996). The term “trauma theory” first appeared in *Unclaimed Experience*, written by Caruth.

Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, cultural, and rhetorical significance. Researchers try to analyze the complex psychological and social factors that influence the comprehension of a traumatic

experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped by narrative or retelling. The activity of retelling the traumatic event sometimes serves as the release of repressed emotions; for example, as in talk-therapy sessions, and at places where the survivor is not in the situation of retelling the event, their silence is analyzed to fill in the gaps.

In this paper, the trauma of childhood sexual assault is explored, and its impacts on the psyches of the survivors are observed by analyzing the characters of Grace from Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* (1990) and Celie from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

Doyle and Thornton state that sexual assault has a quite peculiar impact on its survivors, as, unlike after experiencing any other form of traumatic event, feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame are common following a sexual assault. The paper named *The Trauma of Sexual Assault: Treatment, Prevention and Practice* states that many instances have been reported where individuals were plagued by a feeling of shame for having been sexually assaulted ([Petrak and Hedge, 112](#)). They feel guilty, as a sense of shame about their perceived responsibility for the assault keeps

haunting them. The majority of survivors struggle with the fear of being held accountable or being disbelieved for what happened to them; some of them may actually experience being disbelieved or held responsible for the assault. It is an impossible task to assume what kind of response to expect from a sexually assaulted person and what kind of impact must have been inflicted on her/him after the assault. The long-term consequences of childhood sexual assault usually vary because the outcome is extensively influenced and controlled by the child's perception of the abuse, the family's cultural values, or society's reaction when abuse is disclosed. Usually, a child is unable to understand the crime committed against them and may not show signs of being assaulted, but as they grow up and understand the gravity of the assault, they may start showing signs like being depressed, easily triggered, dissociated, distracted, etc. Survivors who anticipate that their family or society will not be supportive or may react negatively to their narrative of the assault choose not to narrate their traumatic story. Unable to find support, these survivors deal with different kinds of mental and emotional problems on their own. Why some survivors face certain problems and others face different

problems is still unknown. In Kirmayer's words, "Different types of traumas produce different responses, such as dissociative amnesia or intrusive recall, which are a result of the social valuation of the traumatic experience, created in a particular culture" ([Kirmayer, 184](#)). In terms of psychological theories, it remains unclear what causes and influences particular traumatic responses in particular individuals.

Although the effects of extreme experience on the survivor's memory and identity are not agreed upon by psychiatrists and psychologists, it is generally agreed upon that traumatic experiences can disrupt or alter consciousness, the sense of self, memory, and relation to the community. Yet, to what degree traumatic experiences disrupt memory, self, and relation to others is controlled and directed by cultural values and narrative forms that allow or disallow certain emotions to be expressed. Psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer explains how society influences the comprehension of trauma: "Registration, rehearsal, and recall [of traumatic events] are governed by social contexts and cultural models for memories, narratives, and life stories. Such cultural models influence what is

viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded at the time of registration, and, most importantly for long-term memories that serve autobiographical functions, what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged" ([191](#)). This cultural and narrative context hinders the clear and true disclosure of the traumatic event. It forces the survivors to incorporate culturally and socially sanctioned ways and boundaries for the expression of their experience of trauma. Their narrative recall of the event, too, is contaminated by the influence of culture. In the absence of a clear narration of their story and a supportive community, family, or friend, the survivors keep struggling to make sense of their lives post-trauma. How the narrative of such events can be useful for the survivor is aptly explained in *Scared Sick*: "An integrated chronological story that encompasses the experience in words and is shared with another person—someone who bears witness to and validates the struggle—is useful where trauma has been chronic, early and relational" ([Karr-Morse and Wiley, 227](#)).

In this paper, an analysis of the traumatized characters of the selected novels, *Celie* and *Grace*, allows us to fill the gap that is left

behind while skipping the culturally “unspeakable” details of traumatic events and experiences during narration, as well as an analysis of the behavior of these characters is done to examine how trauma takes over their lives after the sexual assaults done to them and how they get or fail to get support from their respective societies. Through psychoanalysis, we get as clear a picture as possible of how sexual assault impacts Celie and Grace. The extensive trauma studies done by psychiatrists and psychologists form our base for such analysis, as they give us information about what impacts may be inflicted on survivors by sexual assault and trauma.

Out of so many different impacts that childhood sexual assault may inflict upon its survivor, like depression, dissociation, loss of interest in life, loss of self-worth, distorted relationships with the world and the self, etc., this paper will primarily explore how sexual assault can push someone to end their life or kickstart their survival instinct and make it their prime relationship with the world and with themselves.

The first selected novel for this paper is *The Color Purple* (2006) by Alice Walker, set in

the early twentieth century in rural Georgia and parts of Africa. Although the major theme of the novel is racial discrimination between Black and white people, only the impact of sexual assault on the psyche of Celie, how it hinders her development as a healthy human being, and how she fights her shortcomings to grow into a happy woman are explicated in this paper.

When we are introduced to Celie in the novel, she is a feeble woman who, instead of living life, receives it at the passive end and does not think much about changing it. Celie is sexually assaulted by her stepfather repeatedly. She gets impregnated by him twice, and he gives away the kids to someone else. We can imagine the kind of mental turmoil Celie must have gone through for having been repeatedly sexually assaulted by her father for years. After having been responsible for all the household chores as her mother was fatally ill, having been assaulted repeatedly, and having nowhere to turn to, Celie accepts her fate and is almost ready to accept every discrimination against her and misdeed done to her without any objection.

Celie is married to Albert (referred to as Mr.

by Celie), who thinks she is too ugly. She is disrespected by Albert because she is not pretty and is brought home only to take care of his kids. She is beaten up by him regularly. She never objects whenever she is treated badly. It is as if she does not expect herself to be happy and her life to be fulfilling. She has left all hopes of fighting to make her life better or taking a stand for herself. She has accepted the fact that she can just survive. “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker 18), and that is what she does. She never fights back against any mistreatment done to her to establish her authority as a living being. Finding herself all alone in this world, she starts writing letters to God, and he becomes her only audience. Other than in her letters, she barely ever speaks her mind or reflects on her life. She believes that as long as she has God, she has someone to hold on to. “long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along” ([Walker, 19](#)).

The fact that Celie is in the habit of writing down her thoughts is remarkable. It can be seen as journal writing, which is suggested by modern therapists as a mode of expression for their clients who are suffering from any kind of mental or emotional problem.

some feminist literary critics and psychoanalytic thinkers work and reach to the assumption that talking about the past will bring their [sic] greater clarity, knowledge and insight. Freud as a psychoanalyst highlights these terms “the talking cure,” “cleansing of the soul,” and being healed (Freud, 1382, 10, 17) ([Heidarizadeh, 792](#)).

Despite writing in her diary, Celie has no other way of expressing her emotions. After her marriage to Albert, her struggle remains the same. She is mistreated by her husband, who married her only to take care of his kids and his house. He beats her up now and then. There is no strand of intimacy between them. The first person who acknowledges Celie’s miserable condition and supports her is Albert’s sister Kate. When Kate visits Albert’s place, she tries to help Celie. She gets her new dresses and tries to improve her status in the house. While leaving, Kate suggests to Celie to speak up and fight for herself. She tells Celie, “You got to fight them, Celie, she says. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself” ([Walker, 22](#)), to which Celie thinks that it is better to not fight and stay alive, as she thinks that fighting back will get her killed like Nettie, her sister.

Celie's reaction to Kate is expressed in the novel as "... I think bout Nettie, dead. She fights; she runs away. What good it does? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" ([Walker, 22](#)). When we reflect on her thoughts, it is clear that Celie's lack of objection towards the mistreatment done to her stems from her lack of belief in or the fear of the result it would get her.

After having lived in a state of trauma almost all her life, Celie has become detached from her reality and has accepted whatever grim situation life has thrown at her. While living in Albert's house, she confesses that she does not feel any affection for Albert's kids, even though everybody thinks that she is so good with them. It seems that she has lost her ability to build real human connections and focuses only on staying alive. She seems to be only completing her duties as a married woman; any evidence of love is missing from her.

After Kate, as the story moves forward, the next woman who changes Celie and her outlook toward life is Sofia. Sofia, Harpo's wife, is a strong woman, built strong, who speaks her mind and won't allow anyone to disrespect her. Sofia is an exact opposite of

Celie. While Celie is a meek, submissive, underconfident woman who thinks she has no rights, Sofia is a fierce, dominant, assertive woman who speaks her mind and fights for her rights. Celie sees the contrast between herself and Sofia and realizes that she does not have the courage to fight back like Sofia and grows jealous. Sofia's way of living presents itself as an alternative lifestyle for Celie, which she admires.

As time passes, Celie and Sofia start talking and bonding. They tell each other of their different upbringings, and Celie shares how she lost her ability to show anger growing up. She tells Sofia how she would feel mad at her mother because she put a lot of work on her, but then she could not stay mad at her as she was too sick. So, she took up all the household chores that a girl of her age would not be expected to do. She could not feel mad at her father because religion told her to respect her parents no matter what. She suppressed all her anger deep inside her, which transformed into detachment, and she lost her basic human ability to feel emotions. She expresses how she becomes disconnected from her emotions to Sofia:

I think. I can't even remember the last

time I felt mad, I say. I used to get mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after a while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all. ([Walker, 40](#))

The next woman to come into Celie's life to support her is Shug Avery. Shug is a famous local singer who becomes Celie's crush even before they meet. Celie admires Shug and would go to great lengths for her. Shug makes Celie feel more confident and loved, and most importantly, she treats her as a human being. Shug talks to her, listens to what she has to say, and gives her new ways of looking at life. One day, while singing at Harpo's Jukejoint, Shug announces Celie's name and tells everyone that her next song is called "Miss Celie's Song." This gesture makes Celie feel worthy of respect, and she proudly thinks to herself, "First time somebody made something and named it after me" ([Walker, 70](#)).

Shug unknowingly helps Celie restore her lost

ability to feel different emotions. Celie gets so comfortable with Shug that she even tells her that Albert beats her when Shug is not there. This information disturbs Shug, and she assures Celie that "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" ([Walker, 72](#)). One day, while exploring her body for the first time after Shug's insistence, Celie exclaims with self-assurance while touching her private body parts "It mine, I say" ([Walker, 75](#)). It is a significant detail of the novel, as, on her journey to recreate her identity, Celie claims not only her sense of self but also her body and sexuality, the site of assault from which she had gotten detached. In Shug's company, Celie finds the space, comfort, and ability to revisit her trauma, feel it, and let it pass. One day, while lying down in Shug's arms, Celie starts telling Shug how her father sexually assaulted her and confronts her repressed trauma for the first time:

I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seems like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arm. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he don't never look at me

straight after that. And Nettie. ([Walker, 102-103](#))

When Celie loses her faith in God after realizing that the man whom she thought to be her father was her stepfather and her real father, a wealthy landowner, was lynched by jealous business owners, and her sister, whom she believed to be dead, is actually alive and has been writing her letters but Albert has been hiding them, Shug tries to reason with her and introduces Celie to her idea of God:

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh. ([Walker, 176.](#))

This kind of God, who is genderless, shapeless, unbiased, has no race, and is all-loving, makes

Celie feel free and empowered. Now, Celie is not afraid to feel hurt, fight back, and even hurt her offenders. Her newly found courage is explicated in the part of the novel where Shug tells everyone that she is taking Celie with her to Memphis, but Albert is not ready to let her go and says that Celie can only go over his dead body. At this, Celie breaks the last barrier, which was a hurdle between her and her growth; she vents. She vents all her repressed anger against Albert and his spoiled kids and expresses her indifference towards them:

Mr start up from his seat, look at Shug, plop back down again. He look over at me. I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now?

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.

Say what? he ast. Shock.

All round the table folkses mouths be dropping open.

You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world.

Mr start to sputter. ButButButButBut. Sound like some kind of motor.

But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass.

Nettie and your children! say Mr -. You talking crazy.

I got children, I say. Being brought up in Africa. Good schools, lots of fresh air and exercise. Turning out a heap better than the fools you didn't even try to raise. Mr reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand. ([Walker, 180-181](#))

We see Celie as an individual for the first time sometime after the abovementioned incident. She and Albert get into an argument where Albert tells her that she is good for nothing and the only job she will be fit for in Memphis is being Shug's maid. Celie, who has found a new God and is motivated by it and gets a sense of self in association with nature, announces, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" ([Walker, 187](#)). This statement makes it clear that Celie has started seeing herself as a complete person. She also curses Albert when he tries to hit her, as she does not allow anyone to oppress her anymore. Celie's story ends up being one of a content woman who has

a woman she loves and who loves her back, a business, friends, a house, and a family. The novel ends in Celie's content exclamation, "But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt" ([Walker, 261](#)).

In *The Color Purple*, we see a full-fledged development of Celie's psyche, and her identity and self-worth improve. We see a feeble and detached Celie claim her identity and life back and become a whole person. But it is of great importance to highlight that this improvement in her self-worth would not have been possible without the help of the women she meets and becomes friends with. This newly found community that she finds herself a member of helps her see the problems in her life, fight them, and conquer them. It is appropriate to conclude that her little community of powerful women and her friendships with these women save Celie.

At one extreme is Celie, who is thrown into a detached life after she is sexually assaulted repeatedly but gains control over her life and builds a decent sense of self after getting into a positive community of supportive women around her, and at the other extreme is Grace,

who commits suicide in the face of the unbearable turmoil of trauma. The reason behind such a startling difference between the trauma responses of Celie and Grace can be associated with the kind of support system they live with. Celie's situation, although not even anything near ideal, is still better than that of Grace, as at least Celie finds someone close to hold on to and rely on in Shug, while Grace's family fails her at almost every moment when she could use a little support and love. It is true that only a community may not be enough for a survivor to get back the control of their life, and different survivors may need different kinds of support, but in order to release the repressed memories and emotions, one can use the help of supportive friends and family that Celie gets and Grace does not.

Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*, published in 1990, explores the lives of a Māori family and the degrading Māori culture of the Pine Block state housing residents in the early 1990s in New Zealand. In the novel, Grace, the daughter of Jake Heke and Beth Heke, is sexually assaulted, and we see a sensitive kid being detached from life and people around her, getting involved with drugs to be able to forget the mental turmoil that the assault has pushed

her into, and finally committing suicide without even seeking proper help.

Grace's traumatic experiences start quite early in her life, as her parents quarrel often after drinking. Psychologists believe that a kid who is brought up in a family where she or he cannot feel secure and stable ends up being traumatized and may have to deal with various or some kind of psychological or emotional disorder later in her/his life. A study conducted by Teicher showed that the experience of verbal abuse and witnessing domestic violence are each somewhat correlated with the symptom of dissociation ([Teicher et al.](#)). Grace feels disappointed by her family and community and gets disgusted by their ways. She expresses her disappointment after an episode of verbal and physical fights between the guests who have come over to her place to party. After the fight is over, everyone behaves as if nothing has happened and everything is just normal. The impacts of living in an environment where the parents and other elders fight now and then and the kids are "corrupted, ruined, and raped" ([Duff, 26](#)) are explained in Duff's *Once Were Warriors* in Grace's voice as follows:

Hearing the Sounds of their shift from the sitting room to the kitchen. And someone starting up the guitar, telling everyone, Be happy now. Like that song: Don't worry. Be happy. As if it is all so easy. As if the events just passed have not taken place. As if it hasn't tramped across another lot of kid's minds, crunched underfoot more of whatever it is that, left untouched, has a kid growing up normal kind of pure. ([Duff, 26](#))

These lines clearly show that Grace feels that her mind and any chances of her growing up like a normal kid are being crushed under such circumstances, and living in her community makes her feel insecure. Living in Pine Block, among her more-than-half-the-time-drunk elders, crushes Grace's soul, and it is clear how a kid would lose all hopes for stable support from such elders. It is interesting that even though Beth pays a lot of attention to the rotting kids of the Pine block, she misses seeing through her daughter. She thinks to herself, "Grace—well, I don't know about her. I never could get through to her. Something about her, I dunno. But she's growing up all the time" ([Duff, 16](#)).

Growing up, Grace becomes the caretaker of her ill-managed and distorted family, in which her parents overdrink and have weekly parties, which may turn into a brawl and an opportunity for her father, Jake, to re-establish his manhood and control by beating up Beth. Grace takes care of the house and her younger siblings when her mother is too beaten up or too drunk to do anything. Grace feels sick about being a part of a doomed community that is sinking into alcohol. She is a sensitive girl who has a desire to realize her potential one day. It is notable that Grace feels no closeness with her community and is even ashamed to have been born into it. Her addressing Māori people as "those" and only unwillingly letting out an "us" serves as evidence that she does not want to be associated with them. She wants to be treated differently and acknowledged that she is better than the other Māori kids. She thinks to herself, "But it hurt knowing a segment of your school peers didn't like you on account of your race. What about the good ones like me? Not saying I'm an angel, but I ain't bad. I ain't" ([Duff, 23](#)). In the courtroom, where she goes to support Boog, her brother, who has gotten himself in trouble, she sees the difference between the Māori and the Whites. She notices how those two worlds are divided

by a big wooden double door with one side filled with White officials and the other side filled with Māori law offenders. Her observation and the desperation to create a different identity for herself as a good girl are depicted in the lines below:

Others in suits or nice dresses, court officials no doubt, hurrying by and disappearing the same way. Most ofem Pakeha, white. Funny that, how one side of the double doors are one race, and the other this race: Māori. Made Grace want to crawl into a hole with shame. Or had her wanting to disassociate herself from them, jump up and explain she was only here to give her brother moral support because she knew her parents wouldn't be here to do same, and she'd even got permission from the headmaster at school to be here, just as long as she didn't take the whole day off should her presence be no longer required, as the head put it. She was a good girl. Maybe a little different from many or most of her peers, and certainly different from her Pine Block peers, but she was a good girl. I mean I have good thoughts. So she supposed that made her good. [\(Duff, 24\)](#)

She idealizes White people and their lifestyle. Looking at the grand courtroom, she thinks that this is what the Trambert's house must look like from inside. Grace feels dejected when the magistrate starts listing Boog's offenses against the law. She feels pity for her brother and feels that the magistrate, having come from a better background, has no right to reproach Boogie like this. She makes a mental picture of the magistrate's background in complete contrast to her own:

She built up a picture of the magistrate, his background, how he must come from a nice home, he'd never seen his father beat up his mother for not cooking one of his friends fried eggs with boiled meat and potatoes.

He'd never been woken from sleep or been unable to sleep for the din of brawling going on beneath you. He'd not experienced any of what the people before him like Boogie have had to endure.

Yet here he is telling poor Boogie what a bad boy he is. [\(Duff, 34\)](#)

In several incidents in the novel, it is shown that she dreams a little too much about the white people's lifestyle and imagines what her

life could have been had she been born rich. She believes that being born into a rich family where her parents would take her places, have her learn new things, and show her love would have given her a head start, and she too could have become “something high up” ([Duff, 34](#)).

This urge to want a different, better life like the white kids but not being able to have it takes a toll on Grace’s psyche; she starts feeling suffocated in her house among her people. This detachment from her people, community, and even parents makes her feel lonely. This pushes her to become a kid who speaks very little; she is always in her mind, thinking or maybe daydreaming. She gets detached from her life and starts living in a limbo between reality and daydreaming. She thinks that the Trambert house (a rich, white neighbor) is a dream and lingers around that dream by trespassing on Trambert's property.

In one incident, Beth confesses that she does not know her own daughter, as she wouldn’t know a stranger. This mother-daughter duo lacks the intimacy, familiarity, and connection it would require for their relationship to work. This leaves Grace without a safe space she could have found in her mother. Grace, like

Celie of *The Color Purple*, feels depressed about her future, and it is expressed in the novel as:

And there was Grace wheeee-ing at another shooting star scribing its signature across the sky. Ah, so sad really: just a brief moment in time and then gone forever. She was running when she saw it. Right in front of her. Lithe of limb and feeling she could run on and on (though not forever. Grace never saw forever in its positive sense. It was inconceivable that something good could last forever, or even a lifetime. A long time even. Just didn't happen to a girl from Pine Block).” ([Duff, 79](#))

Grace hurts to feel loved and cared for like any kid her age would. She craves love, knowing it is no use expecting her father to show any trace of love. She understands her father and knows what he expects his children to be and how he expects them to behave. On the night Grace comes running back to her miserable home after having trespassed on Trambert’s property, her father enquires about the injury over her head. He is concerned if anybody had dared to hit her. At this, the kid in Grace

wanted to know if he would go to rescue her and show her love, but knowing her father and realizing that such an expectation could never be turned into reality with Jake being her father, she reacts in a way Jake would like—by acknowledging his supremacy:

You sure wasn't someone hit you? And Grace wanting dying to know what if someone had? (Would you rush to my defence, Daddy?) Not minding if he did, and to hell with the violence. (I just want to know I'm loved.) No, Dad. Giving him a little (crawling) smile: who'd dare hit a Heke? Now that made me crack a little smile. ([Duff, 88](#))

On top of everything Grace was already struggling through, one night, after yet another of her parents' vulgar parties, she experienced sexual assault at her own house by one of her father's friends. While the assault took place, Grace was not able to move or say anything, even though her brain wanted to scream for help. This kind of response to traumatic events is known as the freeze response. It is a common response that survivors have in the face of trauma. Morse and Wiley express it as "When we are helpless, like a small child in the face of

a violent assault by an adult, we can neither fight nor flee. In the wake of overwhelming fear, we enter a state known as "freeze" (Karr-Morse and Wiley, 19). Such a situation of the survivor is further explained as "When a mammal is unable to carry out fight-or-flight because it perceives itself to be helpless and hopeless, it collapses immobilized into a dorsal vagal state—the freeze response." ([Karr-Morse and Wiley, 35](#))

The assault committed against Grace is depicted in the novel, in which Grace's mental turmoil through the ordeal and her freeze response to it are made visible to the reader. She, being a lonely child who has no strong support whatsoever, can be seen feeling helpless against the person violating her most intimate privacy. She is scared of the possibility of the rapist being her father himself. It shows the level of distrust she has for him. She even fears being blamed for the assault if it's not her father and he sees it happening. She is not sure that her words will be trusted over the assaulter's. Her confusion and doubt are depicted in *Once Were Warriors* as:

And a girl in her head realising: I think

I'm being, uh, molested. Then everything turning hazy, and yet clear: I can figure out what's happening, but can't work out why, I'm confused and yet I'm not. I'm scared and yet I'm scared for him too, this person doing this. This man. (What if it's my father? What if it's not and my father comes in? What if he thinks it's me doing it too?) So lying there. Not sure if she was rigid stiff or the opposite, playing dead. [\(Duff, 90\)](#)

This experience shatters Grace's sense of self. After the assault, the already quiet kid, Grace, goes almost silent. She does not disclose her assault to anyone and bears her pressure and trauma alone. She gets even more detached from the people around her. Life and identity change their meaning and importance for Grace. Beth notices this change in Grace but does not do anything about it and avoids it, not knowing the reason behind it and not caring enough. Grace turns to her only friend, Toot, for comfort and tries to find comfort in drugs. She tells her friend what happened to her and that it was repeated too. While talking to Toot one day, she tells him that despite her mother being somewhat good, she cannot tell her

about the assault, as she does not really get through to her, and as for her father, she could shoot him dead for being the worst father ever:

can't tell my mother, I just can't, Toot. But why, G? She's a choice mother, int she? Yeh, she's alright I spose. But I can't seem to get through to her, I can't kinda like talk to her (I can't I can't. I can't go on like this). as for him he's the worst old man in the fuckin world, I had a gun I'd shoot him stone fuckin dead I would, Toot. [\(Duff, 114\)](#)

The impact of trauma makes it impossible for Grace to get back to her life like before, and she is pushed to create a new identity for herself. Not being able to live with her memories, she tries to find solace in smoking. She asks her friend, Toot, for something heavier, like glue, but Toot rejects her demand. Soon, she realizes that the impact of drugs does not last very long, and then the horrible memories come rushing back to her like before. Maybe in this moment, tired, exhausted, betrayed, and helpless, Grace decides to give up on life. Shanta R Dube et al. state, "A powerful graded relationship exists between adverse childhood experiences and

risk of attempted suicide throughout the life span” ([Dube et al.](#)).

Grace commits suicide on the Trambert’s property. She witnesses the absurd difference between her world and the world of the Trambert kid, who is treated by her elders as an equal, where people wear nice clothes and have nice demeanors and behavior, and her world, where one of her own has sexually assaulted her. The assault done against Grace is the last nail in the coffin. She already had no hope for her community and felt detached from it; she had no attachment to her parents, was unsatisfied with the life she had, and felt deprived, and then the sexual assault disrupted whatever peace of mind she had managed to have to be able to go on, which pushed her to her death.

It is a pity that Grace does not trust her community enough to seek help from them; all she believes it to be is a shattered, doomed culture where potentials are lost. It can be said that in the distorted version of the Māori culture of Pine Block, the people who used to be an honorable and fierce warrior tribe have lost their ways. Grace’s end could have been completely different had she had someone to

talk to who could help her shape her shattered identity better and be her constant support.

Conclusion

This paper discusses how Freud’s ideas of psychoanalysis, the unconscious, repressed trauma, and their effect on the splitting of the ego, or dissociation, influenced and set a foundation for trauma studies. Freud’s studies further the need to discover trapped trauma in the unconscious.

In this paper, it is observed that sexual assault disrupts the psyche of the survivors and shatters their sense of self, which requires them to rebuild their identity. The sense of guilt, shame, helplessness, and the loss of meaning make it unbearable for the survivor to manage. The lives of Celie from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Grace from Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* are explored in this paper to observe how they are affected by traumatic experiences. Trauma can have different impacts on the psyches of different people. For example, while Celie gets detached from her life and develops an attraction for death after experiencing one trauma after another, Grace tries to find comfort in drugs, and after realizing that drugs are not a permanent

solution and their effect can only last not so long, she commits suicide.

It is discovered in this paper that Celie is finally able to heal, as she has a way of expressing her emotions through her journal writing and retelling of traumatic experiences to friends, while Grace finds herself stranded to deal with her experiences alone without any reliable person to talk to. By applying trauma theory, this paper concludes that a community of supportive members helps a survivor live through trauma better, with less mental turmoil, and heal. It is also made explicit that a neglected survivor of sexual assault who gets no support from at least one adult is lost in her confusion and is overpowered by the darkness that her trauma pulls her into. It is concluded that a supportive community can help the survivor rebuild her or his identity and relationship with the world, like Celie; otherwise, a neglected and lonely survivor may fall into the pit of unending despair and end their turmoil by committing suicide, like Grace. The importance of the narrative of traumatic experiences is emphasized, as it helps in uncovering the trapped memories and emotions of the unconscious, resulting in curing the symptoms of trauma in the survivor.

Although, it is noteworthy that different survivors may need different types of help, and talking about the trapped trauma is not the end but the beginning of a long journey where the survivor discovers herself/himself, and the time needed for it is also subjective. As a society, everyone needs to be observant and sensitive towards trauma survivors. Neglecting a troubled person may lead to the worst end, as in Grace's case.

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